

An Ethical Analysis of the Core Principles of Animal Rights

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Abstract

The philosophical tradition concerning animals, humans, and rights often inherently excludes or limits the consideration of the animal kingdom, the concept of animality, and individual animals themselves. It's not surprising that the concept of animal rights was largely ignored for most of history. Before the seventeenth century, a well-defined doctrine of universal natural rights didn't even exist. However, the emergence of international theories led philosophers to develop ideas about international and natural rights. Ultimately, the most impactful writings on animals can be found in the works of philosophers from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, including Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, René Descartes, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant.

Keywords: Animal Rights, Animal pain, Animals and morals, Jeremy Bentham, Immanuel Kant, Tom Regan, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism.

Introduction

In order to incorporate "animal rights" into a natural rights framework, it's necessary to clarify how animals can possess inherent standing—a prerequisite for having natural or acquired rights. This addresses the question of whether humans merely possess rights or if they also have direct obligations towards animals based on this inherent standing. Furthermore, recognizing human standing aligns with our common moral intuitions regarding both animals and ourselves. The domestication of animals led to the formation of a shared domestic environment between them and humans. Animals were driven by the advantages of living in a community, and, because of their limited cognitive abilities, they were cared for in ways that supported their well-being. Hutchinson argues that we are only justified in limiting an animal's pleasure or needs when they substantially interfere with our own, and that we have a responsibility to care for animals due to their role in contributing to the well-being of our homes. The ethical consideration for animals arises from their desires and need for well-being, which are comparable to those of humans. Humans acknowledge this responsibility through empathy and understand the duties it implies.

Animal pain

The concept of animal pain is a crucial element in ethical and legal discussions about how humans treat animals. However, the definition of "pain" is complex. According to Dawkins, pain evolved as an unpleasant sensation to protect us from the greater evolutionary consequence of death. It is part of a system that helps us avoid immediate harm and prevents us from repeating actions that have caused injury."

Discussions regarding animal pain typically rely on two main sources: our everyday experiences of interacting with, observing, and reacting to animals in pain, and scientific research conducted on animals, supplemented by philosophical analysis of that research. Initially, our regular interactions with animals significantly influence our instincts about their nature, including their ability to experience pain. For instance, if a car strikes a dog and injures its back leg, the dog may be seen lying on the ground, thrashing and howling, with dilated eyes and rapid, labored breathing. To pause and question whether the dog is feeling pain could indicate a lack of understanding of pain itself. As Gaita points out, in such situations, it is impossible to doubt; one is entirely convinced that the dog is suffering.

Animals and morals.

There is no agreed-upon definition of the moral status of animals. There are differing views on the ethical treatment of animals. Some consider them resources for human use, whereas others argue that animals have intrinsic worth and should be treated with respect and dignity. Recognizing that animals are sentient creatures capable of feeling pain, pleasure, and a spectrum of emotions, it follows that they should be treated respectfully and with dignity. But Why do we consume animals if they deserve respect and dignified treatment? What determines which animals we eat and which we don't? The acceptance of eating cows and pigs in many cultures, while rejecting the consumption of dogs and cats, raises this question. Some suggest that cultural biases influence our perception of certain animals, based on their intelligence or ability to bond with humans, making it hard to defend eating them. Cultural norms shape our ethical considerations regarding animals. It's important to remember that these cultural beliefs and practices are not static and are subject to change.

Ethical Theories

Jeremy Bentham- Bentham was the first Western philosopher to advocate for equal consideration of animals within a thorough, secular moral framework, and he strongly supported animal welfare legislation. He argues that having moral status comes from the ability to feel pain and pleasure, and as animals can feel both, they have moral status. Bentham's perspective on suffering is rooted in his ethical theory of utilitarianism, which holds that we ought to act in ways that maximize pleasure and minimize pain for all beings capable of experience. Inflicting suffering is inherently wrong, and such suffering is permissible only if it leads to a greater amount of pleasure than the pain it causes. However, he also believed in the use and killing of animals, provided that unnecessary cruelty was prevented. Bentham argued that causing unnecessary suffering is morally wrong, regardless of the sufferer's intelligence or ability to communicate. His utilitarian perspective suggests that because animals like dogs and horses are capable of experiencing suffering, their pain should be considered as significant as human suffering.

Immanuel Kant- Kant says that we only have a moral duty to humans because of the difference between humans and animals. However, we do have moral concern for animals. He argues that we are not bound to nonhuman animals since obligations arise from mutual relationships between rational beings. Christine Korsgaard interprets Kant's principles to mean that interactions with others should be conducted in a manner that would reasonably allow for their consent. As animals are incapable of giving consent, Korsgaard proposes we should interact with them in ways that we believe they would consent to if they were able. This entails ensuring interactions are mutually beneficial, fair, and allow animals to live lives that are reasonably consistent with their natural behaviors and needs. This method allows us to defend our utilization of animals as companions, protectors, laborers, or sources of wool, dairy, and

eggs. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that a nonhuman animal would willingly agree to be killed prematurely for consumption or the production of food and similar items. Similarly, it is improbable to suggest that an animal would consent to undergoing painful experiments.

Tom Regan - Basically, Regan's animal rights theory is connected to human rights. Humans have rights based on inherent values. We have different inherent values. Therefore, inherent value is equally applicable to all beings who are the conscious subjects of a life. It's reasonable to consider all animals at least one year old as subjects of a life.

To advocate for animal rights, the crucial question is whether the animals commonly consumed, hunted, and utilized in laboratories within our society are indeed subjects of a life. To develop the most sound understanding of our obligations to one another, we must acknowledge the equal inherent value of each individual. Reason, not feelings or emotions, compels us to recognize the equal inherent value of these animals, and consequently, their equal right to respectful treatment.

Contractarianism involves rules people willingly follow, like signing a contract.

Those who understand the contract are directly covered. The contract creates, recognizes, and protects their rights. Contractors can also protect others who can't understand morality and can't sign the contract. This protection extends to those they love or care for. For example, young children can't sign contracts and don't have rights themselves. However, they are still protected because others, like their parents, care about them. Our responsibilities to children are indirect duties to other people, usually their parents. When it comes to animals, they are unable to comprehend contracts, so they obviously can't sign them; as a result, they lack rights. Nevertheless, much like children, some animals evoke sentimental feelings in people. In contrast, for other animals, such as farm animals or laboratory rats, where there is little to no emotional investment, our responsibilities towards them diminish significantly, possibly to the point of completely disappearing. Hence, Regan outlined these three central goals of the animal rights movement: abolition of the use of animals in science, dissolution of commercial agriculture, and elimination of sport hunting and trapping.

Regan is a Deontologist not a utilitarian. A utilitarian accepts two moral principles. First, everyone's interests matter. Similar interests should be treated equally. Second, do what makes the most people happy and the fewest people unhappy. This is the principle of utility. He believes that actions are intrinsically right or wrong regardless of consequences. To defend animal rights is to claim that certain ways of treating animals can never be morally justified on utilitarian grounds. He argues that humans and non-humans should have equal rights because of their equal intrinsic value. Animals, like humans, exist for a purpose of their own and not for anyone else.

Religious implications

Religious traditions significantly shape the moral beliefs and ethical inclinations of countless people around the world regarding animals. Despite their diverse beliefs, religions often share core principles, including the ethical treatment of animals. Ethical considerations regarding how we treat other people are connected to how we treat animals. In most religious traditions, animals play a symbolic role. Therefore, caring for animals is a moral and religious duty.

Hinduism- A central tenet of Hindu theology regarding animals is the belief that the Supreme Being incarnated in various animal forms. These incarnations began with a fish, followed by a tortoise, a boar, and a dwarf. The fifth incarnation was a man-lion. Furthermore, reverence is extended to other species, as Rama had close ties with monkeys, and Krishna was always in the company of cows. Moreover, the

Hindu concept of reincarnation, in which individuals can be reborn as animals or birds, fosters not only respect but also reverence for these species. The position of each animal within the hierarchy of life is not random but determined by the immutable law of karma. Good deeds lead to a higher status, whereas bad deeds result in a lower one. This system implies that animals hold a comparatively inferior rank. Nevertheless, this view is softened by numerous sacred texts, including the Rig Veda and the Atharva Veda, which praise individuals who show kindness to animals.

Buddhism- Buddha advocates for the practice of metta, or "loving-kindness," directed toward all beings without exception. This involves nurturing a sense of love and kindness for every creature, whether they are timid or bold, large or small, significant or insignificant, seen or unseen, near or far, living or yet to be born. The intention is to fill every direction with a loving spirit. Buddhism aims to transcend suffering and achieve liberation from the continuous cycle of death and rebirth. Notably, Buddhism inherits the hierarchical perspective of beings and the concept of reincarnation from Hinduism. However, it introduces the concept of individual liberation through enlightenment. Later Buddhist interpretations hold that the painful cycle of rebirth occurs in six realms of existence: the heavenly, the demi-god, the human, the animal, the hungry ghost, and the hellish realm. The last three of these realms are evil, the animal realm included.

Jainism- Jainism, an ancient religion from India, is based on four key principles: nonviolence, multiple perspectives, non-attachment, and asceticism. Adherents typically practice vegetarianism and strive to prevent harm to all living beings. It is recognized as the most rigorous religion concerning the protection of animals, prohibiting killing even in self-defense. Jainism elevates nonviolence to the highest ethical responsibility, extending beyond the views of Hinduism and Buddhism. The concept of Jiva is similar to the Western idea of consciousness or soul. However, Jainism believes Jiva exists everywhere. This includes gods, humans, animals, and plants. It even includes beings in hell and non-living things. There is, therefore, an emphasis on a common hidden vital principle that joins all things into a kind of brotherhood. The universe in all its realms is eternal and self-sufficient.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the main tenets and issue of animal rights through an ethical lens. The text also examines the philosophical foundations of Animal Ethics within a religious framework, highlighting their symbolic significance across various faiths. While nonhuman animals may not hold the same status as humans, their rights must not be overlooked. It demonstrated that integrating animals into the community of equals is impractical due to the significant disparities in cognitive abilities between animals and humans. Some even argue that granting animals the same rights as humans would significantly reduce human well-being and prosperity.

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